



MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS

Parents' Morals Remain with Second Generation Moulding Company

by Brian Welsh

"Make sure you maintain good relationships with your customers and your suppliers and make sure they are making money or you are not going to be in business for too long yourself," said Gayle Morrison, former president and owner of Sunset Moulding Co. This philosophy also is engraved in his son John Morrison, who is now the president of the company.

Gayle Morrison and two partners founded Sunset Moulding Co. in 1948 in the Northern California area at the base of the Sutter Buttes, in a quaint town known

today as Live Oak. As the company grew and changes took place, Gayle and his wife, Mitzi, decided to buy out the two partners and run Sunset as a family business, producing solid and finger-jointed wood mouldings.

As a family business, Sunset continued to enjoy success and growth, and in 1979, the company purchased three new plants in California that allowed it to specialize the production at each plant. However, in 1998, the company made a significant addition when it purchased the assets of Custom Forest Products. This enabled

Sunset Moulding to add medium-density fiberboard (MDF) moulding products to its product mix.

The Rule of Four

The company still has four locations, and each location is specialized in a certain area of production. The Cottonwood, Calif., plant produces solid lineal mouldings. The Chico, Calif., plant produces solid and finger-jointed mouldings and millwork. The Live Oak, Calif., plant is home to the corporate offices and also produces the company's specialized MDF-trade-marked product—Suntrim. The



Forklift driver Fermin Rio has worked at Sunset for 13 years.

company added its newest facility in 2003 when it purchased a plant in Idabel, Okla., where it also manufactures the Suntrim MDF product line and helps service customers on the East Coast.

The Sunset Moulding executive team consists of John Morrison, president; Ric Morrison, vice president of production; Mark Westlake, vice president of sales; Mo Steele, vice president of purchasing; and Wendy Forren, chief financial officer. While many on the team are from the family's second generation, the team still executes the visions of the Morrisons.



Jeff Hunter is a paint line operator at Sunset where he has worked for six years.

"Service is everything," says John Morrison. "If we aren't providing great service and maintaining great relationships with our suppliers and our customers, we will no longer be in business. Dad always said to do the best you can to make sure everyone around you is making money, even your suppliers. Without them, you would not be here."

"Instead of squeezing a supplier when times are advantageous to Sunset, we believe in working with that supplier to help them out. We don't want to destroy a relationship that has been built up over a long period of time," adds Morrison.

Domestic Versus Imports

Sunset currently gets its supply from both domestic suppliers as well importers.

"We feel we receive pretty good quality and service out of Chile and New Zealand, but imports have

changed over the past couple of years. Late shipments and cancelled loads have everyone looking at their supply differently now. You also need to be a smart buyer and watch your inventories very closely, so a good mix of domestic supply and import supply makes sense." Morrison says.

As far as MDF goes, Sunset is getting its supply from North America, but Morrison states that the current MDF market has been very tight and the company must do its job right and work hard in maintaining its relationships. Setting up programs and sticking with your suppliers in the up and down markets is essential. That is why when other producers were out of stock, Sunset was able to continue to run their normal shifts and even run overtime for their customers.

"The year 2004 changed the way

continued on page 22

MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS CONTINUED



Two-year employee Jose Garcia is working with the mitre machine.

people looked at things ... with containers being held at ports and people not being able to get their product, distribution had to turn to domestic supply. I believe all domestic manufacturers are now proving they have an important role in the supply of product going to the distribution channels. When you think that you can place an order and receive it in three to four weeks from a domestic supplier, or your other option is to go an importer that can take 3 to 4 months from placement (if the boat is on time), it starts making your purchasing decisions a bit easier.” Morrison explains.

Staying Competitive

As far as imports from a manufacturing standpoint, Morrison says, “Imports are the competition right now, which has made the domestic moulding manufacturers be more aware of working on projects together.”

Whether it’s at a Wood Moulding and Millwork Producers Association meeting or by phone, many domestic manufacturers can be found working together either asking for technical advice on equipment or even lending a hand when another manufacturer faces an unfortunate situation.

“I grew up with my competitors at WMPMA meetings and those second- and third-generation kids are now running the companies their parents started. They are not only my competitors but also my friends. We touch base on issues and try and help each other when we can,” Morrison says.

Not only does Sunset have challenges with its import competition, but it also has issues domestically, such as high energy costs, high real estate costs, the challenge of finding qualified labor and the overall cost of an employee (i.e. workman’s comp and health insurance).

Put a Rush on That

Sunset takes advantage of domestic fill-in opportunities when an importer isn’t able to provide its product.

For example, on a recent Friday morning, the company’s plant in Live Oak was manufacturing mouldings which went right from the production line onto a truck to be delivered to a Sacramento, Calif., customer that afternoon. The mouldings went from there to be on a shelf at a big box on Saturday morning.

This “rush load” came about because a customer didn’t get the product in time from an importer and turned to Sunset Moulding for help. Whether it is a rush load or not, Sunset focuses to get every order out when promised.

Keeping Your Word

“Communication between our sales team and production team is vital,” adds Sunset’s sales manager, Mark Westlake. “If our salespeople say we can do something for a customer, our production people must be able to manufacture it for when we have promised it. Our customers communicate their needs and it is up to us to let them know what we can do and not just tell them what they want to hear. Business has changed over the years dramatically and rush loads and on-time shipments have now become a must for our company. It’s what we do.”

In order to accomplish and fill rush loads and keep great relationships with its customers, the company’s plants are set up in a manner to accommodate the best possible manufacturing opportunities. Sunset Moulding is constantly investing in cutting-edge technology and researching improvements in its production procedures.

“Ric, my brother, has taken on lean manufacturing like it’s a religion,” says Morrison.

Ric Morrison, who is in charge of all production, has helped to shape the company’s Live Oak plant into one of the most efficient and safe MDF moulding manufacturing sites in North America.

Due to that lean focus, the production line is set up so the MDF sheets are loaded, ripped, moulded, primed, packaged and ready for shipping with a minimal amount of labor. Other than loading the MDF sheets by forklift to start the process, employees are not utilized until the packaging starts to take place. However, quality control is continuous throughout the procedure, as each line is assigned an individual whose sole responsibility is to patrol the line to assure quality

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—John Morrison

is maintained as the moulding travels through the manufacturing process.

The majority of the machinery the company uses was professionally-made for it, except for the moulders which were modified for the company’s special needs by Weinig.

Employee Loyalty

Sunset Moulding has 220 employees currently. The Live Oak facility has approximately 44 employees on its production team, runs two shifts per day and puts out 7 to 10 truckloads per day of the company’s Suntrim MDF line.

“The whole company backs up the

service aspect of our business. For example, in order to get the rush load mentioned earlier to Sacramento on a Friday afternoon, our employees in the plant came in at 5 a.m. to get it done. Just recently

another customer wanted an extra four truckloads in one week, and the employees worked overtime so we could produce the extra loads and still get out all the other orders booked for that week,” Morrison says.

To stay on the cutting edge and to be a leader as an MDF manufacturer, the next phase for Sunset Moulding is setting up a lighter-weight MDF product line.

“A portion of our customer base wants a lighter-weight MDF product, and we want to give them what they want. So to accomplish that we are investing in the technology to upgrade our production lines to manufacture super lightweight mouldings that will be up to the standards of Suntrim quality.”

Although the second generation has taken the reigns, “Mom and Dad still bring the mail in everyday when they are in town. Even after 60 years they are still the spirit of this company,” Morrison says. As far as maintaining the relationships, “Instead of going to a restaurant, Dad used to invite customers and suppliers to his home all the time so he could ‘burn a steak’ for them. Doing business that way has worked for more than 50 years and the current generation of the Morrison family is going to keep it going for the next 50.”



Sunset employees are committed to getting orders out even if it means coming to work at 5 a.m.

Brian Welsh is publisher of SHELTER magazine.